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Magnolia:
A creative thesis project

by
Stephanie Tshappat

An undergraduate honors thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Bachelor of Arts
in
University Honors
and
English

Thesis Adviser
Professor Lawrence Wheeler

Portland State University

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Table Five

"Can I get you anything else, hun?" The waitress asked the young blonde woman, refilling her coffee cup. "Something to eat? We've got a great burger on special today."

Startled, the young woman looked up at the waitress; Tiersa, her nametag read. The blonde's eyes were red and tear streaked her face.

"Thanks," the blonde whispered. "I'm not hungry."

Tiersa looked down at her, the worry lines creasing her forehead deepening. She put a hand on the woman's back. "Hun, you okay?"

The blonde shook her head, once, and covered her eyes.

Tiersa looked around the diner; it was empty save for this sad blonde girl. Ryan, the cook, was occupied cleaning the prep stations. Tiersa set the coffee pot down on the girl's table and sat across from it.

"What's your name?" she asked the blonde.

The blonde sniffed, wiped her nose on the back of her hand. "Clare," she croaked.

"Oh, I love that name. So pretty. My favorite aunt's name was Clare." Tiersa smiled kindly at her. "Let me get you something to eat, darlin'. You look like a hot meal'd do you a world of good. And look at my cook over there." Tiersa nodded toward the grill. "He's bored, with nothing to do but wipe the grill down over and over. You're the only soul in here, why not give him something to do?"

Clare looked up, a shock of her blonde pixie cut falling in her eyes. "We always wanted to come in here," she whispered. "Me and my fiancé. We drove by every day, but never made the time."

"Well, you made the time today, sweets. Where's this fiancé?" Tiersa asked.

Clare's full eyes brimmed over.

*

Parade of Echoes

"Babe. I miss you."

Clare turned her head at the sound of Mitchell's voice and smiled wide at the sight of him, shirtless, next to her in their king size bed, the rumpled white bedclothes looking like a foreign landscape, the room around them sunlit, bright. He was lying on his side, his head propped up in his hand. His dark brown hair, too long, was starting to curl down his neck and over his ears and stuck up in the back. His green eyes twinkled as he grinned back at her, his teeth a startling white against the dark tan on his face. Clare rolled over to face him, laid her hand on his cheek, stroking his face. "Baby, I'm right here," she whispered, "I'm right here. I never left. I'm still here."

"I love you." Mitchell's eyes lost their twinkle, and his grin died away as his face grew solemn. The light in the room faded to gray. "Wake up."

~

Clare sat up, breathing hard, certain she'd just heard Mitchell's voice. She turned and stared at the empty space next to her in the bed, her eyes filling with tears. It felt like the darkness that had fallen while she slept consumed her. She *felt* dark, black, in her mind, in her heart. The tears fell, the pain Clare tried to keep buried was a fresh wound again, the dull ache in her chest now burning, still hollow. She took a shuddering breath and climbed out of bed, padded barefoot into the kitchen. She

started some coffee brewing and sat at the oak kitchen table, resting her head on her folded arms. She tried to remember if she'd heard Mitchell's voice in a dream or if she was already awake when she thought she heard it. She hardly ever remembered them anymore, but when she first lost Mitchell dreams of him plagued her night after night. She hadn't slept for weeks. For the most part, she was over the insomniac phase, sleeping away her days and her nights instead. She didn't know if it was a curse or a blessing that she didn't have a job to consume the empty hours she spent alone, trying to hide from herself.

Clare pushed away from the table and grabbed the thermos out of the dishwasher, filling it almost to the brim, topping it off with creamer before putting the lid on. Still in her purple-striped pajama bottoms and white tank top, she grabbed her keys off the table in the hall, pulled Mitchell's oversize gray hooded sweatshirt on, then crammed his old Mets ball cap on her head. She chanced a quick glance in the entryway mirror as she walked toward the door, not entirely comforted by what she saw. The dark circles under her gray eyes had faded slightly and her cheek bones weren't as hollowed out as they had once been, but she thought she still looked like a different person. Her jet black hair hung in stringy clumps under the ball cap and her skin, normally pale, looked sallow. Clare tried to tell herself she didn't look as bad as she had two or three months ago. And she was eating again. But the stranger in the mirror stared at her with hollow eyes she couldn't quite meet. She looked away and walked

out the front door, climbing into the jeep. She sat for a minute, breathing in the faint scent of Mitchell that still lingered there. Jamming the key in the ignition, she headed out of town toward the cliffs.

~

Sitting on the jeep's hood, leaning back against the windshield, her knees bent, Clare cradled the thermos of coffee in her hands. The moon was full and the stars like a blanket in the clear sky. She sipped her coffee slowly, staring out over the cliffs and the chasm between them. The moonlight shone softly, lighting up the sides of the canyon and the few plants and brush brave enough to take root there. She could see halfway down the canyon to the ledge where the cliff divers jumped into the river below. She'd come here with Mitchell a few times last summer and watched them.

Mitchell. This had been their spot, the place he had taken Clare on their first date: a picnic on the cliffs at sunset. She had laughed at how he even had a wicker picnic basket with a red and white checkered blanket for them to sit on. She remembered how at ease she felt, how he had made her laugh her way through dinner. She had been amazed at how comfortable she was with him, even then. She felt she had known him forever.

It was easier to mourn here than alone in their bed, in their room, in their house, and Clare's tears spilled down her cheeks. Her mind flashed forward to the day they found out Mitchell was sick, seven years to the day from their first date. Forward again

to the first radiation treatment. The parade of doctors. The terminal diagnosis. The funeral. Oh, God, the funeral. She had worn her wedding dress and sat alone in the front pew, Mitchell's friends scattered in the rows behind her but his family nowhere to be seen. She'd been relieved they didn't have the nerve to be there.

Clare didn't make any effort to wipe the tears from her face. She forced herself to think of something other than the funeral and Mitchell's family. Another flashback to her first date with Mitchell—how, after the picnic, they lay on the blanket together, her head on his chest, and looked at the stars. She'd been delighted when the meteor shower started, had never seen so many shooting stars arcing across the sky. Clare fell a little in love with him that night. She sipped her coffee and closed her eyes as she laid her head back on the windshield, a gentle breeze lifting the ends of her hair.

~

Table Eleven

Tiersa grabbed a washrag out of the bleach bucket under the counter and wiped down the bar, glad for the lull in customers after the lunch rush. "Hey Ryan, Kara," she called over her shoulder, "Y'all come help me clean up out here and then you can clock out."

They both came shuffling out from the back room; Ryan headed for the grill and started cleaning up the food prep stations and Kara came up to Claire and snagged the bleach rag out of her hand and started wiping down tables. Since opening the diner seven years before, Tiersa had gone through about seventeen employees trying to find honest, reliable wait staff and cooks to help with the lunch and dinner rushes. Kara was sixteen, her goddaughter, no waitressing experience when she started, but when Tiersa told Kara's mom, Lanee, about the rotating door that was her wait and cook staff, Lanee sent Kara in to get an application.

Tiersa wiped down the counters at the waitress station then walked over to the grill to check on Ryan's clean-up. "Hey kiddo," she said to him. "Nice work today. I'm gonna eat my lunch before y'all head out. You remember the chicken cheesesteak I showed you? Today's assignment: make me up one of them, plain. And some onion rings."

"Yes ma'am, I remember. Coming right up."

"You asked her yet?"

"Um, ma'am? A-asked her what?"

Tiersa smiled. "Out on a date. You're a good kid, Ryan. You'd be good for her." She winked at Ryan and walked into the back room. "Chicken cheesesteak, plain. Don't forget my onion rings. Thanks hun."

Kara walked into Tiersa's office one step behind her. "Auntie Tiersa? I found this on table eleven when I cleaned it off, wasn't sure what to do with it."

Tiersa flicked her eyes down the pages Kara handed her. "It's a letter. Says it's to the Tin Man," she laughed. "What table was on it on?"

"Seven."

"Hmm. There was a brunette sitting there drinking coffee this morning. Odd."

Kara smiled. "Takes all kinds of kinds, auntie."

*

Dear Tin Man,

Oh, where to start?

I had to see you. I could've found someone else to attend the meeting for me, could've begged off due to my busy schedule and the projects that needed to be finished. I could've, but I didn't.

I didn't—I thought we were okay, thought we could at least be civil, given our last conversation, and the things I confided in you. I was wrong. You were awful to me. Completely horrid and one hundred percent open about it. Tin Man, you didn't even try to hide your contempt. I had to sit there and endure it for three hours. Every second that passed made it worse.

I felt so vulnerable, like our time had been a mistake. You know all of my scars and secrets. As those moments ticked by I wanted to take every one of them back from you. All I could do was cover the physical scar on the inside of my wrist, absurdly wishing it would disappear.

You couldn't look at me without disdain. I wanted to shrink under your scornful gaze; make myself as small as possible and hide. I wanted a razor; because any pain I would inflict on myself would have been more bearable than the heartless pain you made me suffer. I wished you would've just cut me open and taken out my heart to

replace the one you no longer have. That would've been less painful than being in the same room as you that day.

Or maybe you really are the Tin Man, and you never had a heart to begin with.

I can't take back what is done; your actions or mine. I can't take back any of the hurt.

All I ever wanted was to be in your life. To be accepted, included, considered . . . to be important enough to you that everyone else would know it. I always told you if we were together we could do anything. But we never were together, were we, Tin Man? We weren't, not really. Even when we were with each other, really, we were all alone.

But now—to have you just completely disappear, gone for good, no turning back, burned the damn bridge to ashes—this is what it feels like to be empty.

Is this how you feel, Tin Man, with no heart to speak of? Do you feel that way even now, even with your inane ability to rise to the occasion and carry on, as though all that we had was just a marvelous dream?

I feel like I am breaking open inside. Is this what it feels like, your heart breaking? Do you even know? Tell me the truth—did you ever really have one?

And even with all of this, I still miss you. I'd give anything just to be able to hear your voice one more time.

I can't do this. I need you in my life. I've never needed anyone else. I missed you before you even left. I hate that I have no idea if I will see you again.

But Tin Man, my need for you does nothing for the one thing you so desperately need, does it? If you'd had a heart all this time, do you think things would have turned out differently for the both of us? Would you have stayed? Would we have made no excuses? Would I have stayed? The possibilities of what should have been make me dizzy and it takes all I have to not just start screaming.

I love you, Tin Man. I've loved you. I'll always love you.

But I always felt like it wasn't enough. Like I wasn't enough.

You never noticed the sacrifices I made for you. I tried to give you enough love that a heart would just manifest itself in your chest.

And maybe I took for granted the ones you made for me.

Was it her, all along? Was that the difference—that I truly wasn't enough, and she is everything you need? Did your absent heart manifest for her, the way it wouldn't for me?

I need you to know I don't hate you. Even though I can't forgive you. Even though I won't get over you not being there for me. Even though you never had a heart.

I still love you.

I will always miss you.

I know there's no going back. I'm sorry for that. I can't apologize enough, because in the end, it was me inflicting the pain for once, it was me who burned the final bridge. Don't blame me for choosing a means to an end. But know you put yourself out of my reach long before I reached for someone else.

But I miss my friend, Tin Man.

You were my friend before you were my lover. Helping me. Giving me advice. Making me laugh.

You were my friend first, Tin Man. And that's what I miss the most.

I hope maybe someday you'll be able to see things from my side. Most likely not—we both know how self-indulgent you can be. But maybe someday you'll see I did it for the better of us both. Maybe someday you'll see I had no choice.

I do everything I can to forget seeing you at that meeting. Seeing the hate in your eyes.

Instead, Tin Man, I think of how you were the morning I came home and held you until you fell asleep; how peaceful and content you looked, a small smile curving your full lips.

I've learned the hardest thing I've had to do is forgive myself my past.

I will hold you that way for the rest of my life, Tin Man. That morning stretches into infinity in my mind—you and I together, just like the Neruda sonnet I always

quoted to you: “so close that your hand on my chest is my hand/so close that your eyes
close as I fall asleep.”

~

Table One

Tiersa sat down behind her desk in her small office, and leaned back, closing her eyes. The books were already done for this month, all the bills paid. It felt bizarre to be able to just sit, for the moment, quietly, and enjoy her lunch break. She was so used to the constant multi-tasking of running the diner, plus having to pick up the slack of the old wait and cook staff—being able to put her feet up for a minute felt strange.

"Damn nice to have such good help." She plunged an onion ring into some ranch dip. Wiping her fingers on a napkin, she brought up her email homepage on the office computer.

LOCAL WOMAN ARRESTED FOR ATTEMPTED ARSON, the news headline declared. Forgetting email, Tiersa clicked the link, suddenly face-to-face with the mugshot of one of her breakfast regulars, bitter Miss Table One.

"Oh my sweet Jesus." Tiersa scanned the article, shaking her head. Tiersa had tried to chat with Table One when she first started coming in, but only received terse, one-word answers. Table One always ordered the same thing—Denver omelet and black coffee—so the need for speaking to her at all eventually ceased. "Who woulda known that woman was crazy."

*

Scorned

I could burn it all down.

Burn.

It could all burn.

Shasta took a long drag of her cigarette, blowing the smoke out slowly, savoring the fact that the house was now hers and she could smoke inside if she damn well pleased. She got the house in the divorce and had thrown it in her Jacob's face that she had the house and he had nothing. Which is what he deserved, having an affair like the asshole he was.

Except

No. He has nothing.

He's remarried already. To her. They're having a baby.

Yeah, well, fuck him. And fuck her. I got the house, and I don't need him. There are plenty of men out there for me.

Shasta got up from the table and poured herself some Pendleton, on the rocks. She drained the glass and poured another.

You know Jacob deserves the life he has now.

No, I don't know that, Shasta thought. I know that he had an affair and then he left before—she shook her head to clear it, and lit another cigarette. She watched the lit end glow red and then fade with each drag she took.

She had known about the affair for a few months before she confronted him. Jacob hadn't argued, or tried to defend himself, which just pissed her off. She figured he would be groveling, begging her to forgive him and let him stay. All he said was, "I never wanted this." And she knew he was referring to their marriage, and not the affair.

And it was in that moment she decided to kill him.

Shasta drained her glass of whiskey, contemplated the ice left in the bottom as she swished it around.

"Mother fucker!" she screamed, heaving her glass toward the wall. It shattered, the shards of glass and ice dangerously mingled on the floor.

Fuck this house. It can still burn.

Jacob'd left before she'd been able to kill him. She realized she'd underestimated him, that fifteen years of her constant berating, condescension, screaming in his face that he was worthless hadn't left him as broken as she'd counted on. She'd always thought he'd be there, begging to be with her.

Over drinks once, a few years before the affair started, one of her former friends asked Shasta why she was so mean to Jacob. What was the point of cutting him off

sexually, making him sleep downstairs, throwing the occasional beer bottle at his head?

He seemed like a nice enough guy, her friend said, why don't you treat him better?

Simple, Shasta told her, he doesn't deserve me. He never did.

But it was your idea for the two of you to get married. He never even proposed.

Shasta responded appropriately by telling her friend to go fuck herself.

And now Jacob was already remarried, and that bitch was pregnant. He wasn't supposed to be capable of living without her. How dare he?! She couldn't believe she'd been so stupid as to let him get away so easy, without being able to inflict any of the pain she had so carefully planned out for him.

Somehow, she'd been able to keep her growing rage towards him contained over the years. They fought, of course, and it got bad—she'd scream at him, sometimes throw the bottle of whatever she was drinking at his head—but her really bad thoughts she'd been able to keep to herself. It was easy, because he never fought back, never raised a hand to her. Sure, in the beginning he yelled back at her, but the more she wore him down, the quieter he got, until he wouldn't say a word when she tried to pick a fight, he'd just grab his keys, get in his truck and leave. Every time he slammed the door, she felt triumphant, knowing she was keeping him in his place: under her foot, where he belonged.

Of course, now Shasta knew where he had been going.

She got up to find another glass, and poured another whiskey. She shook out another cigarette out of her pack on the table and lit it.

~

Shasta looked into the picture window again. There he was, sitting with *her*, at the dining room table. All she could see of Jacob was his back, but she had a perfect view of the whore. They were laughing, and Jacob reached out to hold the pregnant slut's hand.

It was like driving by a car wreck—Shasta couldn't look away.

Why she'd even walked through his neighborhood on her way back from the liquor store in the first place—

"Fuck you," Shasta muttered. "You can't replace me. You worthless cheating bastard. Fuck you." She fumbled in her pockets for her pack of Marlboro Reds, tucking her bottle of vodka in its brown paper bag under her arm.

The fingers on her left hand finally touched the smooth surface of the lighter nestled in a deep corner of her pocket as she tucked the vodka bottle more firmly under her right arm.

Her lighter. The bottle of vodka. The picture window.

The explosion was massive—the flaming vodka bottle hit the window dead center, and Shasta was sure Jacob had looked out and seen her, as the bottle was sailing towards his romantic dinner. Her replacement, the cow, never noticed a thing. Black

smoke billowed up from the house and the flames began to lick the edges of the window, creeping out to engulf the walls and the rest of the structure.

Shasta smiled.

“Ma’am? Excuse me, ma’am?”

Shasta looked up into the stern face of a police officer. She saw Jacob in the window with the phone in his hand. The replacement, hand on her belly, was cowering behind him.

Shasta’s lighter was in her left hand, the makeshift Molotov cocktail in her right, seconds away from being lit.

The officer nodded toward Shasta’s hands. “Ma’am, I’m going to need to ask you some questions.”

~

Table Seven

Still shaking her head over Table One—Shasta, the article said her name was—Tiersa walked out of the office to see Kara scurrying from around the grill and back to the bar. Ryan didn't even try to save face, standing at the grill with a goofy grin, looking like the cat in the cream; Kara was blushing ten shades of red and pretended to count her tips. Tiersa smiled at the pair, nodding Ryan off to clock out. "Ryan finally asked you?" she whispered to Kara, opening the till to cash her tips out. Kara blushed afresh and gave a quick nod of her head, red curls bobbing up and down. "He's taking me out to dinner at that new steakhouse on the highway and then to a movie." She stifled a giggle. "I've been waiting for him to ask me out for weeks!"

"He's a good kid. He'll be good for you. Especially after" Tiersa trailed off.

"I know, Auntie." Kara smiled grimly then changed the subject. "Has Miss Risa been in lately? I haven't seen her my last couple shifts."

Risa was an old friend of Tiersa's, came in for coffee and a bagel every other day, always sat at table seven. "Y'know, I don't recall her being in here the last week or so. She had that meeting with her lawyer, remember, about her trouble with Brent, and all that awful stuff, and I haven't seen her in here since then."

"You think she's okay?" Worry lines creased Kara's forehead.

"I hope so." Tiersa patted her on the back. "Don't worry, sugar, I'll run over and check on her after I close tonight."

*

Break Me Down

Risa glanced up, distracted by the sudden humming of the refrigerator. She stretched her arms above her head and arched her back, then relaxed and breathed a sigh of discontent. Her kohl-rimmed eyes scanned her apartment, taking in the clutter that had gathered in every room. Newspapers, empty wrappers, books, magazines, and sheets of paper littered with her untidy scrawl were strewn throughout the small space as though a cyclone had blown through; her clothes made a trail from room to room, her last clean pair of jeans and t-shirt in a heap where she had shed them just inside the double doors that led out to the balcony. She rested her folded arms on the patio table and tucked an auburn curl behind her ear as she looked through the open doors into her apartment, taking in the mess again. Risa looked around her apartment, taking in the chaos of the rooms that had become her refuge and the prison of her own making. I don't think my apartment has ever had this much evidence that someone actually lives here, she thought. Her eyes followed the trail of her dirty clothes from the living room, to the hallway, the doorway leading to her bedroom, and the doorway leading to her office . . .

The one orderly place, where it appeared as though calmness prevailed, seemed to her to be the eye of the storm. Just looking into her study, things didn't seem so bad.

Everything was as it should be, the books still on their shelves were alphabetized, pens and pencils were at peace in their coffee mug on the desk, where the computer hummed quietly and a sheaf of legal papers (labeled URGENT with a red stamp) that needed her attention had been left front and center. No matter how calm Risa's office seemed, the paperwork it held was the reason behind the chaos in her life, manifested through the mess in the rest of the apartment.

Closing her eyes, Risa tried not to remember the meeting she'd had with her lawyer—was it two weeks ago or three? Time was losing meaning. She remembered trying to think of something that would save her, but there was nothing. The loophole the defense lawyer had found was the reason she was locked in her apartment. She was in shock, even now.

The little reprieve she had created on the balcony was a relief, an escape from the apartment she now couldn't bring herself to leave, and the place she found herself coming time and again when she needed to clear her head and think. When she first moved in, she'd enclosed it with lattice on the two sides that faced the rest of the apartment complex, leaving the third open to a view of the park that next door. She'd planted morning glory, bougainvillea, moon flower, jasmine, mandevilla and clematis in little flower boxes and pots lining the edges of the balcony, and trained the flowers to scale the metal fencing and lattice as they reached their leaves toward the sun, turning the patio into a riot of color. The flowers vined through the lattice and crisscrossed over

themselves, making the balcony wonderfully quiet and secluded—her own little paradise above suburbia. Risa had a great view, but the rest of the world carried on, oblivious to her sitting at her little bistro table in her bra and panties, with her legs drawn up and her chin now resting on her knees.

She closed her eyes, listening to the bubbling of the tiny fountain in the corner. For what seemed like the millionth time, she wondered how she had ever let things get this bad and how she had ever managed to let everything get this complicated. After everything he had done, everything he had done to her, a technicality was his saving grace—and would ultimately be her downfall.

What she wouldn't give for a cigarette right now. She'd quit three years ago during a health kick and had only smoked a handful of times since, usually with cocktails, never when she was stressed, because that would be the first step of a backslide. Still, she tried to remember if she had an emergency pack stashed somewhere in the apartment. Looking through the patio doors again, she knew she wouldn't be able to find a carton of cigarettes in her apartment's dishevelment, let alone a pack.

Risa tried to change the direction of her thoughts. She had run through this endlessly in her mind and it hadn't done her any good, seeing as how she was sitting on her patio, half naked and craving a Marlboro so bad she could almost taste the tobacco. She smiled sardonically to herself, thinking how her mother would be scandalized if she could see her sitting there and could know the current state of her life.

Closing her eyes again, she leaned her head against the back of the chair. She wasn't up for thinking about her mother either. All of a sudden she was exhausted, the events of the past weeks finally catching up to her. She felt enormous heaviness to her shoulders, triggering tightness in her chest and a pricking sensation behind her eyes that was too familiar. She felt lightheaded and tried to remember the last time she ate; stress had always overruled her appetite. Risa willed herself to stop her hands from shaking, trying to take a deep breath despite the constricting feeling in her throat.

It was too much for one person to handle alone, but there wasn't any other option. She refused to risk her loved ones' safety by dragging them into this. Risa stood to walk into the apartment, unsteady on her feet. She only made it as far as the living room, pulling a thick green afghan off the back of the couch and curling into a ball on the floor, welcoming the oblivion of sleep, and praying to God she wouldn't dream.

~

Table Ten

Tiersa looked up with a smile as the bell on the door jangled. "Well hey there Rachel, how you been hun? Want your usual?"

"That'd be great Miss Tiersa, thanks." Looking distracted, Rachel took the end seat at the bar.

"As you can see, not a soul in here 'cept you," Tiersa said, setting Rachel's sweet tea down in front of her. "Let me get this burger cooked up the way you like it and then we'll have ourselves a chat."

Rachel cracked half a smile. "Don't you tease me and put all that lettuce and what not on there. I want it the original way—mustard, onions, chili, and 'slaw."

"Oh come on now, I wouldn't ever do such a thing!" Tiersa winked at her and headed for the grill.

*

"Now," Tiersa said, setting the huge burger and fries in front of Rachel, "update me. Is today the big day?"

Rachel nodded, her mouth full of fries.

"And? You feeling okay? You ain't been in here at all the last month. Bad enough you're leaving me for a new start, but you then you wait till the last possible minute to come see me." Tiersa faked a sniffle. "If I were the insecure type, I'd think you were forgetting me already."

"Oh, c'mon now, Miss T!" Rachel laughed. "I couldn't ever forget you, you know that. I just hate goodbyes."

Tiersa covered Rachel's hand with her own and gave it a squeeze. "I know you do sug, I know."

*

Kill Devil Hills

It wasn't quite sunset when Rachel pulled the rental car into the gravel parking space just past the beach access sign. This was the first road trip she'd taken in three years, the first time she'd ventured past Savannah's suburbs. She left her shoes in the car, climbed the sand-covered wooden steps that crested the dunes. However relieved she was to be leaving, Rachel knew she couldn't face her new start—going back to school for her master's degree at the University of South Carolina in Columbia—without saying goodbye to her piece of the Atlantic.

The sand still carried the day's warmth and caressed her feet as she strode across the beach to the water line. Pelicans skimmed the waves, fishing for dinner. The tide was going out; ocean waves curled around her toes, the foam lapped at her ankles. Rachel took another deep breath of salty air and felt her body slowly begin to relax, the tension leaving her shoulders and neck. She raised her arms up, holding them away from her body as if preparing to hug the water and began another cleansing breath—but it caught in her throat, stifled by the sudden, intense pain in her chest, like she was being split open from the inside out. Somehow her breath still came, in short, jagged, shallow gasps. The old fissure in her heart threatened to rend her in two, shatter her into pieces. Again.

Elliot. Three years ago her nephew Elliot had posed exactly like this, back to the world, preparing to embrace the waves. Rachel blinked the tears from her eyes and she was on that beach in the Outer Banks with him again, the glow of twilight everywhere, the sun setting behind them in the west. Elliot stood in front of her, his dark, curly hair ruffled by the light breeze. He wore frayed khaki shorts and a ribbed tank top, army green. The light made his skin look darker than its normal olive tone. She wanted to walk up behind him and wrap him in one of her special, big, strong, Auntie Rachel hugs, just one more time. She began to walk toward him, reaching up her hand to muss his curls like she always did. She tried to say his name, but she choked on the whisper. Tears cascaded down her cheeks and sobs began to rack her shoulders.

She'd taken a picture of Elliot trying to hug the ocean that day, and there was a framed, black and white copy of it hanging in her sister's living room. Rachel had taken it without him knowing, to commemorate their trip. It had been a special trip, just Auntie Rachel and her favorite fourteen year old nephew, for no other reason than Rachel was sick of Savannah—sick of the city, sick of its busyness, sick of her dead-end job copy-editing mathematics textbooks, sick of the man who'd swore and promised her he was different—she'd just needed to escape. So she arranged it with her sister, Lena, and Rachel and Elliot left Atlanta in the rear view mirror. They drove the seven hours to North Carolina, to Kill Devil Hills on the Outer Banks, at leisurely pace, stopping

frequently to enjoy road side produce and boiled peanut stands, or to investigate signs that said things like, “TWO-HEADED SNAKE TURN HERE.” It took them two days.

Elliot was the perfect road trip companion because he had a way of immediately putting you at ease, just by being around him. There were no awful, trying-to-fill-the-space-with-talk moments with Elliot—the silences were introspective, not meant to be filled. He had always been quiet and intense, even as a baby. He had accompanied Rachel on several other escapes because of these qualities, but the Outer Banks trip was special, because it was for an entire week and it was the farthest they had ventured beyond Georgia.

Rachel tried to blink the tears out of her eyes, shaking her head to clear Elliot’s face from her mind. She was thankful for that trip, for that fun time where it had been just the two of them. They woke up each morning to sun filling the rented condo with light and the sound of the waves on the sand resonating through the open windows. They flew kites and built sand castles and went for runs on the beach. Every night she cooked them a feast of fresh seafood and hushpuppies. Elliot never asked her what was wrong, or why she had been crying as they drove out of Savannah. Instead he told jokes that were funny because they were so stupid and narrated in a British accent how his last days of fifth grade had played out and how excited he was to start middle school. He chased her sadness away with laughter, which was a special talent that, out of everyone in their family, only Elliot seemed to have.

The accident had happened only a week after they got back. The magnolia trees were blooming; the weather hadn't yet transitioned to the swelter of summer. Elliot was riding his skateboard home from school, was only a few blocks from his house. A truck had careened around the corner, too fast, the driver tweaked out on meth. Elliot had his headphones in, didn't hear the screeching tires. There was no way Elliot could have survived being hit by that truck and the one comforting thought, if you could call it that, was that his death was instant, and not an episode of drawn out suffering, lying broken in a hospital bed.

Rachel closed her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath, and let it out slowly.

"Love you, E."

She looked down at the inside of her left forearm, where e.e. cummings's words—"i carry your heart...i carry it within my heart"—were tattooed with Elliot's initials. She drew the same words in the sand, walking away before she could watch them be erased by the surf.

~

Closing

Front door locked. Check.

Till counted and balanced. Check.

Deposits made ready for the morning. Check.

Everything cleaned up, wiped down, dishes done. Check.

Going through the nightly closing list in her head, Tiersa did a final walk through of the diner, making sure she hadn't forgotten anything. She ran her hand along the smoothness of the bar as she walked around it to the back of store. Flipping off the lights one by one, she smiled, shaking her head. Sometimes it was still so bizarre to think all this was hers. She'd had her own heartbreak and hard times, it was true, but somehow, she'd been able to turn it into this, finally—her own success. Murmuring a whispered thank you, Tiersa shut off the last light, set the alarm, and closed the back door behind her. The lock slid into place.

*

Ukiah Logging Country

Tiersa stares blankly at the muted TV, “if onlys” splaying across her thoughts as she finishes her coffee.

(If only Daddy’s doctors had noticed the cancer signs earlier)

(If only she didn’t have to go to her soul sucking job today)

(If only she didn’t live in this hell hole of a town)

She doesn’t understand people who say they have no regrets. Is that possible? Isn’t there any decision they wish they never made? Occurrences in their past they grieve over like a death, wishing they could change?

She hears Mama’s words from their last conversation; they echo the same disappointment her mother always had in her father.

(If only Mama understood her)

Stretching, Tiersa gets up from the worn leather recliner she’d insisted on inheriting; it was Daddy’s favorite, broken springs and all. Going into the kitchen, she pours another cup of coffee, adds creamer and Kahlua. She sees the TO DO list she scrawled out at work waiting on the counter. Unceremoniously, she throws it in the trash. Her mind drifts to a recent discussion with her therapist.

“You don’t allow yourself to fully feel anything, Tiersa. You bulldoze your feelings.”

“It keeps me safe.”

“But it’s also keeping you from living your life.”

This is true. Every time Tiersa tries to plan her future, she feels stalled. She doesn’t want to feel—yet she’s tired of numbness.

Which is worse? The numbness or the pain?

She’s had her share of pain and doesn’t think it’s all that great. She’s heard people say, if it hurts, you know you can feel. What good is feeling when the things you love the most are snatched right out of your life? Tiersa thinks, staring vacantly out the window over the sink, taking in the wasted desert hills, the brown of the farmers’ empty fields. What good is pain?

She’s believed all her life God doesn’t give you anything you can’t handle; what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger. But Tiersa and God are no longer on good terms, and what hadn’t killed Tiersa left her weak and gaunt, wane—almost daily, she longs for her heartbreak to kill her.

Tiersa wishes someone had told her about broken hearts. She’s always believed people died of broken hearts and imagined there was emotional pain that went along with it. Nothing had prepared her for the acute physical aching in her chest the day Daddy died. She knew her heart was broken. A year later and it’s still hard to breathe, she can’t sleep without alcohol or sleeping pills—it doesn’t matter which, as long as the pain is abated, and with it, the memories of Daddy lying in that hospital bed.

Tiersa opens the window to the bleak fall day, grey overcast sky stretching into infinity. She itches for a cigarette—for the smooth feel of it between her fingers, the smell of the smoke, the taste of the nicotine. She'd grown up hating smoking, wishing Daddy would quit, terrified it would kill him. He tried to quit, countless times, and no matter how many times he couldn't quit, he never stopped trying. His refusal to give up was something Tiersa admired to no end, although Mama saw only failure and her own disappointment.

Ironical that liver cancer took Daddy, not lung cancer or emphysema. Shortly after he passed away, Tiersa bought her first pack of Marlboro Reds, smoking simply because she missed the smell. She only smokes outside, because she hates the stale odor clinging to her hair and clothes, but it's one more thing that makes Daddy feel closer.

She sighs. If only.

~

Tiersa drives south, gripping the Jeep's steering wheel with shaking hands, dumbfounded at the passing of time. A year—still stuck in Pendleton, still stuck at her worthless job. Daddy, she thinks, blinking through her tears, do I disappoint you? How can I be making you proud, when I'm stuck here?

She sees the trees, the sign for Battle Mountain, and wipes tears and snot away from her eyes and nose with the back of her hand, leaning forward in the driver's seat to get the first glimpse. Slows for the curve, down shifting the Jeep to accommodate.

Tiersa is smiling now through her tears—almost there, she thinks. She feels the grief and sadness lifting from her shoulders, and breathes easy for the first time in months. She knows it's Daddy, easing her burden of grief.

"Thank you, Daddy," Tiersa whispers as she crests the mountain, catching first sight of the beautiful rolling fields leading to her drive's end.

Through the tiny town of Ukiah, back up into the mountains, into what had been logging country. Daddy worked these trails and roads when she was small, had loved being surrounded by the beauty of the mountains. She turns the Jeep onto the old logging track and parks, leaping out and heading west through the brush and pine trees. She finds Daddy's tree, a "D" carved in the bark, marking the spot where they had spread and buried his ashes. She sees the old coil of logging cable on top of the burial site, the cross made of sticks on top of the cable. Everything is as they left it.

Tiersa sinks to her knees, her hand on the trunk of the tree.

"Happy birthday, Daddy." She looks up at the sky, hoping he hears her. "I miss you. The hurt never goes away. Nothing is the same."

A breeze sighs through the pines, lifts the ends of her hair. She chokes back a sob.

"I promise this isn't forever. I'll make you proud."

~

The Jeep is packed; Tiersa says her goodbyes without tears. The drive to her new start, to Aunt Betty and Savannah, Georgia, should take about four days. She lights a

Marlboro Red as she swings onto eastbound I-84, George Thorogood blasting from the speakers.

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